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ABSTRACT

Effective government relations is the key to meeting the fiscal and legislative needs of public education. This fastback is designed to help educators establish an effective government-relations program. It offers suggestions for identifying legislative priorities; forming internal and external networks and coalitions in support of the legislative priorities; and shaping opinion and exerting influence with decision makers to achieve legislative priorities. The first chapter describes the publics, guidelines, and process of government relations. Chapter 2 discusses the issues of and the implications for the role of government in public education. The third chapter describes a four-step planning process for effective leadership in government relations. Communication tools to help form successful government relations are discussed in the fourth chapter. Chapter 5 provides strategies for maintaining effective government relations at the federal level. The final chapter explores ethical issues in government relations. (LMI)

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Effective Government Relations for Public Education

Lawrence A. Wiget

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PHI DELTA KAPPA EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

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Effective Government Relations for Public Education

by
Lawrence A. Wiget

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Table of Contents

Government Relations Defined 7
- The Publics 7
- The Guidelines 8
- The Process 9

The Role of Government in Public Education 10
- Issues and Implications 12

Effective Leadership in Government Relations 14
- A Four-Step Planning Process 16
- Key Roles and Responsibilities 20

Strategies for Successful Government Relations 23
- Tools of Communication 26

Effective Government Relations at the Federal Level .. 35

Ethical Issues in Government Relations 37

Government Relations Defined

Effective government relations is the key to meeting the fiscal and legislative needs of public education. The purpose of this fastback is to help educators establish an effective government relations program. Readers will find means for:

- Identifying legislative priorities;
- Forming internal and external networks and coalitions in support of the legislative priorities; and
- Shaping opinion and exerting influence with decision makers to achieve legislative priorities.

Government relations in public education is the relationship a school district has with local, state, and federal governments and their agencies that determine the revenues, laws, and regulations that govern the operation of the public school system.

Government relations goes beyond public relations. The purpose of school public relations is to influence internal and external publics to support school district programs and policies. The purpose of government relations is not only to influence these policies but also to build networks and coalitions among selected internal and external publics to achieve specific legislative, regulatory, or funding objectives. It is an ongoing communication and advocacy endeavor.

The Publics

There are two general classifications of publics in government relations: internal and external. They are composed of individuals and

organizations who are affected by or affect the funding, legislation, or regulation of public school education.

Internal publics include school board members, administrators, teachers, support staff, and students. External publics include parents of students; community members (including nonparents); civic and community organizations; local, state, and national employee organizations; local, state, and federal elected officials and government agency administrators.

Each of these publics brings a different perspective to public education, and thus each should be viewed individually. For example, the parent of a child in the public school system directly benefits from local taxes paid to support public education; a nonparent does not. However, the nonparent may benefit in other ways. A good public school system may attract business and industry, creating jobs that enhance the local economy and raise property values.

The Guidelines

To develop and maintain effective government relations programs, school leaders need to follow several guidelines. These guidelines will be further developed in the course of this fastback. Broadly stated, they are:

- Assign responsibility for developing and maintaining the government relations program of the school district.
- Establish formal and informal systems of ongoing, reciprocal communications with both internal and external publics, as well as with governing bodies and agencies.
- Build coalitions among key communicators, internal and external publics, and governing bodies and agencies.
- Promote mutual respect among members of the internal and external publics and governing bodies and agencies.
- Provide appropriate and timely communications and distribution of information to all internal and external publics and governing bodies and agencies.

- Communicate both the negative and the positive facts and information to maintain credibility with internal and external publics and governing bodies and agencies.
- Develop directories and handbooks for internal and external publics as well as for governing bodies and agencies to facilitate communication.
- Evaluate strategies and programs on a regular basis.

The Process

The government relations process follows a fairly straightforward path. First, school boards set policy and adopt legislative priorities. The school district administration implements policy and legislative action plans to achieve legislative priorities. Internal and external publics provide input into the policies and legislative priorities through the school board and school administration.

Internal and external networks and coalitions communicate with the local, state, and federal government bodies and government agencies in support of school district policies and legislative priorities. Finally, local, state, and federal government bodies and government agencies: 1) enforce existing laws, regulations, and policies; 2) adopt, modify, or oppose school district legislative priorities; and 3) initiate laws, regulations, and policies.

This fastback begins with the premise that many, if not most, decisions about education are basically political decisions. The education of the past will not serve the needs of today's students as they prepare for the world of tomorrow. Thus, if public education is to be successful in meeting the education needs of students, educators must recognize the political realities of public education and take an active role in shaping public opinion and influencing political decisions.

9

The Role of Government in Public Education

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are more than 42 million elementary and secondary public education students in the United States. They are taught by 2.5 million teachers. They attend 84,000 elementary and secondary schools in more than 15,000 public school districts with combined annual operating budgets totaling in excess of $228 billion. On the average, only 6.2% of public school education funding comes from the federal government. The majority of the funding is almost evenly divided between the state and local levels (47.3% from the state and 44.1% from local sources, primarily property taxes). Other contributions, including revenues from fees and taxes, such as those on the sale of cigarettes, account for only 2.5% of the funding revenue.*

By the year 2004, it is projected that there will be more than 49 million students enrolled in U.S. elementary and secondary public schools. The schools will have a combined annual operating budget totaling more than $284 billion in today's dollars.**

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*U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics, 1993* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993), pp. 11, 38, 96.

**U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2004* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1993), p. 3.

Each level of government — federal, state, and local — plays a role in public education. However, the power of establishing and maintaining a free, public system of education for all children lies with the state government. The responsibility of the state for providing a system of public education includes not only providing for public school finance but also regulating public education, such as establishing teacher certification standards, requirements for high school graduation, and school attendance policies.

At the local level, school districts are classified as either dependent or independent. Dependent districts are those that must seek approval of their operating budgets from another agency, such as the local city assembly or city council or the county government. Independent school districts set their own budgets and go directly to the voters for support.

Clearly, a dependent school district must work closely with the governing agency that oversees it and determines its budget. But close cooperation also is important in independent school districts. Nearly half of the funding for public education comes from local contributions; so an independent school district also must work with its local government, because the district is competing with other government entities for the same local dollars.

While the primary responsibility for establishing and maintaining a system of public education rests with the state, and subsequently with local government, numerous federal government programs also provide funding to school districts. Federal money is distributed to school districts either by the federal agency directly or through the state, which receives the funds as block grants. Grant funds are allocated to eligible school districts by the state's own department of education.

Federal agencies that directly fund school programs include the U.S. Department of Education and others, such as the Department of Agriculture, Department of Health and Human Services, and Department of Defense. Familiar programs include Chapter 1, impact aid, and programs in vocational education, bilingual education, and Indian education. The Department of Agriculture funds child nutrition programs,

such as free and reduced lunches. The Department of Health and Human Services funds Head Start, and the Department of Defense funds the Junior ROTC program.

Issues and Implications

Two major sets of issues are current in public education. The first centers on the quality of education being provided to students and the environment in which teaching and learning take place. Public education is being asked to provide: 1) greater accountability by school districts for the education of students and for the resources available to them, 2) higher standards and mastery of basic skills, and 3) safer environments in which to educate students.

The second set of issues centers on the services and programs provided by public education and public involvement in the education process. School districts are being asked to: 1) work more closely with social service agencies to meet the myriad of needs of students, 2) offer more education choices to students, 3) enhance local control of schools, and 4) provide for greater parent involvement.

From the standpoint of state and local governments, the challenge is to provide adequate and equitable resources to fund public education so that these issues can be addressed. A companion to this challenge is facing the greater competition from other public agencies and services for dwindling public resources.

In addressing these issues, states, local entities, and school districts must come to terms on such matters as defining the standards, the values, and the graduation requirements for a public school education. Which standards make the most sense? Whose values are most representative? What curriculum will best help students meet those standards and acquire those values?

Consequently, another set of questions arises that must be answered through effective relations between schools and various levels of government. Who makes the decisions in public education? Who deter-

mines the policies, the regulations, and the level of funding? The simple answer is elected officials, government agency administrators — and the voters.

Thus the implications for public education are equally simple. School leaders must work cooperatively with local and state governments in order to effectively meet the education needs of children. They can better ensure positive results by developing and implementing a comprehensive government relations program.

Effective Leadership in Government Relations

To be effective advocates for children, educators must take on new leadership roles. A way to look at this notion is through the acronym, LEAD:

Learn the political process.
Educate the public.
Advocate for funding, policy, and regulatory needs.
Defend the role of public education.

Learning the political process and how to influence it is itself an ongoing process. Following are the basics:

- Learn the names of legislators and their staffs, key government agency officials, and the state school board. Which legislators represent your school district? What are their political affiliations? How do you contact them?
- Learn how to access the system. When does the legislative session begin? How often does it meet? How does one find out about the status of legislation?
- Learn how the legislative process works. What are the steps for introducing legislation? What committees must the legislation pass through before it becomes law?

Most of these questions can be answered by contacting the local library for directories of local officials or by calling the local division of elections or elected state officials directly. However, the most important steps in the learning process may be listening to, respecting, and responding to legislators and their requests for information.

Educating the legislators about the programs, services, and needs of the school district is vitally important. Legislators, like most people, remember what it was like when they attended school. However, schools are more complex than ever before, serving a student population that brings with it greater needs. More important, the schools of today are preparing students for the world of tomorrow. The education that legislators received years ago will not serve the needs of today's students.

Invite legislators into the schools. Share with them the strengths and weaknesses of the system. Help them become part of the process to improve the schools. Let them know how the money they provide is being spent.

Advocating on behalf of children means focusing on programs, services, and regulations that affect children and their education. It is not enough merely to educate the legislature about the education system. It is important to advocate for the solutions that promise to provide the resources and services that will ensure an adequate and equitable education.

Defending the public schools is essential, in addition to educating the public and the government entities and advocating for public education. School leaders need to counter the half-truths and rumors that permeate the public's perceptions. For example, a frequent criticism is that test scores are declining. If that conclusion is accurate (which is not always the case), then why are the scores lower than 10 or 20 years ago? Is it because students are doing poorly in education today compared to the past? Or is it because more students are taking the tests than ever before, or is it because a larger percentage of our students are living in poverty than in years past? The public deserves a comprehensive answer, and the schools are ill-served by half-truths.

A Four-Step Planning Process

Effective leadership can be translated into a substantive plan by following four steps:

- Identify legislative priorities.
- Develop an action plan.
- Execute the strategies.
- Assess the outcomes.

This process is designed to enable a school board to identify its key legislative issues, to build coalitions among its internal and external publics, to establish effective communications procedures and programs, and to evaluate on an ongoing basis the effectiveness of its government relations program. Educators must:

Identify Priorities. The responsibility for establishing the district's legislative priorities rests with the school board. The school board is the policy-setting branch of the district. Board members should solicit input from the district's key internal and external publics, either directly or through the district's administration. Once the priorities are determined, they should be formally adopted by the board. In this manner, the priorities become official board policy, which members of the board as a whole have agreed to support.

Identifying the district's priorities can be accomplished through a number of means, including:

Basic Research: Examining past, present, and upcoming legislative policies, practices, and issues affecting district policy, governance, and funding.

Surveys: Obtaining input to identify key legislative issues of concern to the school board, district administration, and the internal and external publics, as well as support for specific issues.

Interviews: Soliciting firsthand input from key communicators about the legislative issues of greatest concern to the district.

School Board Work Sessions: Enabling the school board to discuss the legislative issues and concerns in a public forum before they are formally adopted. Standard board procedures can allow such work sessions to be an opportunity for members of the public to express their ideas and concerns about proposed priorities.

School Board Meetings: Adopting the legislative priorities in formal public meetings gives the school board the opportunity to publicly show support for the priorities.

A school district may have legislative priorities for all three levels of government; but often, for practical reasons, it will focus on those concerning the local and state levels of government. The federal government, while its impact is not negligible, is often beyond the influential scope of individual schools districts. However, even the smallest school districts can have an impact on federal legislation, mandates, and regulations, as I will explain in a moment.

School district priorities should take into consideration: 1) the financial needs of the school district, including the operating budget and capital projects and maintenance needs; 2) the legislative needs or interests of the school district, including laws and statutes that affect the governance of a school and for which the local or state branches of government have responsibility; and 3) the regulatory needs or interests of the school district, for which government regulatory agencies have responsibility and for which regulations can be set that bypass the legislative process, including issues that fall within the purview of the state school board or department of education.

Specific school bonding issues — for example, local bonding for the construction of new schools or local operating levies — also may be considered, but they need to be dealt with as separate issues with separate time frames and agendas. They are taken up in cycles that are affected by the legislative process, but they require specific and detailed action plans of their own and so are best dealt with as separate from the government relations process.

Develop an Action Plan. The legislative action plan provides a framework for the legislative strategies, activities, and programs to be undertaken by the school district before, during, and after the legislative session.

The legislative action plan supports the school board's adopted legislative priorities and takes into consideration the challenges of competing interests. The plan should be the foundation and focus of all the actions undertaken by the school district in the political arena. However, it also should be fluid enough to allow for changes in the political environment and crises that may develop. The legislative action plan should:

- Identify goals and objectives for the legislative program based on the stated priorities;
- Specify strategies, actions, tools, and tentative time frames; and
- Outline responsibilities of the school board members, administrators, other staff, and, if applicable, lobbyists.

An underlying function of a legislative action plan is to force the school district to think not only about how to achieve the legislative agenda but also about how forces at work within the local community and the state influence — promote, alter, or limit — that agenda.

Execute the Strategies. Strategies, such as meeting with local legislators prior to the start of the legislative session to discuss the school district's legislative priorities, are the ways by which the government relations program achieves the district's goals. Their purpose is to build networks and coalitions to help shape opinion and influence decision makers. The tools, such as office visits, postcards, or telephone calls, are the means by which strategies are accomplished.

Executing the strategies of the action plan means recognizing that communication between and within the internal and external publics of the school district and with the local, state, and federal governments is a two-way process. The goal is to establish "mutually satisfactory" com-

18

munications that result in increased understanding, support, and involvement in obtaining supportive revenues, regulations, and legislation.

The strategies must be subject to change based on circumstances. They are representative, but not all-inclusive. For example, an unplanned strike of district teachers could cause the schedule for school visits by legislators to be changed. Unanticipated election results and changes in the make-up of the legislature might cause changes in how the district approaches the political process, depending on the new personalities and new political affiliations. Changes in the economy of the community, in the attitude of the school board, or in administrative personnel also may alter the thrust of the government relations program strategies.

Assess the Outcomes. On a continuing basis, informal assessment may be used to evaluate the success of a particular strategy and may include informal interviews with selected members of the internal and external publics, as well as reflective self-assessments. If a specific strategy was successful, why it worked should be noted. If it was not successful, school leaders should attempt to discover why it failed.

A formal assessment of the legislative program should be conducted annually. This formal assessment should examine:

- The fundamentals of working with the legislature, including the skills of school board members and administrators responsible for the legislative program — for example, communication skills;
- The development and execution of the legislative action plan;
- The quality of legislative work achieved by the school district as a result of carrying out the strategies; and
- Overall attainment of legislative priorities in such areas as funding, capital projects, laws, and regulations.

Government relations is a dynamic field. Assessing the outcomes enables the school district to adapt to changes in circumstances and improve the strategic government relations process.

Key Roles and Responsibilities

Several groups and individuals must assume key roles in the government relations program. Assigning specific roles and responsibilities enables a school district to establish accountability and draw on the human and financial resources from throughout the district to meet the legislative objectives of the government relations program. Following are role attributes and responsibilities for the school board, the superintendent, the administration, the staff, the legislative liaison, and the district's lobbyist.

School Board. As the policy-setting body of the district, the school board also has the responsibility for establishing the legislative priorities that the district will pursue. The school board:

- Communicates directly, under the leadership of the board president or a designee, with the legislature, the governor's office, and other agencies of government;
- Represents the school district before civic and community groups to present school district concerns and needs and to garner public support for the resources and legislation necessary to meet the district's mission; and
- Directs the superintendent to implement board-approved legislative strategies and policies.

Superintendent. As the chief executive officer of the district, the superintendent implements school board policy. The superintendent:

- Communicates directly, as directed by the school board, with the legislature and other offices and agencies;
- Serves as the principle point of contact for the district lobbying effort and coordinates, in consultation with the school board, the lobbying work assignments; and
- Directs administrators and other staff to work with the local, state, and federal governments and their agencies for the realization of the school district legislative priorities.

Administration. As a group and individually, the district's administrators:

- Recommend legislative policies and priorities to the superintendent;
- Respond to requests for information from the legislature and the department of education;
- Represent the district at legislative and department of education functions and on committees; and
- Direct staff and resources to fulfill the district's legislative goals and objectives.

Staff members, under the direction of the administration, work across division and department lines to enable the district to achieve its legislative goals and objectives.

Legislative Liaison. School districts designate a staff member, usually an administrator, to serve as a liaison to the legislature and other government offices and agencies. Districts that employ a public relations director sometimes assign these responsibilities to that person. The legislative liaison:

- Directs, in consultation with the superintendent and district lobbyist, the district resources necessary to fulfill the legislative goals and objectives;
- Responds to requests for information from the legislature;
- Represents the district at legislative activities or department of education events, as directed by the superintendent;
- Testifies before the legislature;
- Coordinates district activities with the local government, the PTA, civic and community groups, employee groups, and local businesses; and
- Coordinates local activities with state or federal government agencies as necessary.

District Lobbyist. Larger districts, in particular, may hire a lobbyist. This individual may be a full-time employee, a part-time employee, or hired on an as-needed basis. The lobbyist:

- Provides assistance and information to legislators and officials that will result in favorable decisions to the district;
- Advises the school district about legislative actions that will directly or indirectly affect the function of the district;
- Recommends strategies that the district should use to achieve legislative priorities; and
- Provides district representatives scheduled access to key legislators and officials.

The lobbyist also provides the superintendent and the school board with a monthly summary of legislative actions, supplements written reports with verbal reports on a frequent basis, participates in and offers advice on the development of district priorities, and participates with district personnel in meetings with legislators between sessions.

22

Strategies for Successful Government Relations

Following are a number of strategies that can be used to develop and implement a successful government relations program:

Networks and Coalitions. Networking with internal and external publics means that information is exchanged, understanding is enhanced, and lines of communication are opened for dialogue to clarify issues or help mold opinions. Networks are webs of communication; not all members of the network will agree on a given issue.

Coalitions move beyond the network of communication to advocacy roles for supporting, opposing, or modifying funding and legislative issues important to the school district. However, coalitions only extend to the issues with which the various publics agree.

An example may be helpful in understanding these distinctions. In Anchorage, the Anchorage School District, the municipality of Anchorage, and the University of Alaska at Anchorage have worked together to develop a joint legislative package. This network has spawned a few coalitions on specific issues; however, network members have been free to advocate their own positions on other issues where the network did not have general agreement.

The advantages of this network have been two-fold. First, each member of the network has gained a clearer understanding of the needs

of the other members. Second, the networking has led to some issue-based coalitions. The coalitions have resulted in some agencies advocating for school district needs, even though they are in competition for the same resources.

Building networks and coalitions also can be helpful on a statewide level. School districts with similar interests may band together to work on common legislative issues. For example, urban districts scattered throughout a state may have similar problems for which statewide support would be useful. Several years ago, Alaska's urban districts formed a coalition to obtain funding for school construction and maintenance. While the coalition did not achieve immediate results, during the next legislative session the legislature adopted a statewide matching grants program for capital construction and maintenance that eventually benefited both urban and rural school districts throughout the state.

Community Involvement. School board members, administrators, and staff should be encouraged to get involved in the local community, such as attending Chamber of Commerce meetings and participating in community or civic organizations. School board members, administrators, and staff should be made available to community and civic groups for presentations about topics that are important to the school district.

Positive community involvement helps to shape the community's opinion of the school district, but it also helps shape the school district's understanding of the community's concerns. Involvement opens channels of communication so that when it is necessary for the school district to go to the community for the support, community members are willing to listen because the school district has listened to them.

Timed Actions. There are specific actions that should be taken at specific times. For example, important times are before and after an election and during a legislative session. Some actions should be taken on an annual basis. Following are representative examples.

24

Prior to an election:

- Identify the school district's legislative priorities.
- Obtain a list of legislative candidates from the Division of Elections.
- Send an information packet to all legislative candidates. The packet should include the names and phone numbers of school board members; district level administrators, their departments, and programs; elementary and secondary schools and their principals; and the physical location of schools within their legislative boundaries.
- Send a questionnaire to candidates on education issues of importance to the school district and ask for their written responses.
- Invite legislative candidates to visit schools and to discuss the school's programs and needs with the building principal, staff, and community.
- Provide school board members with an information packet that includes: names and party affiliations of candidates, schools within the candidates' legislative districts, and each candidate's stance on education issues, if available.
- Send follow-up thank-you notes to all candidates who visited schools or who responded to the school district's questionnaire.

After an election:

- Send a congratulatory note to all successful candidates for office. Invite those who have not visited the schools in their legislative districts to do so.
- Invite newly elected officials to meet with the district superintendent, representatives of the school board, and appropriate district personnel to discuss the school district's legislative priorities and concerns.

- Provide newly elected officials with a district handbook that includes a district personnel directory, the district's legislative priorities, and supporting information.

During the legislative session:

- Maintain an ongoing presence with the legislature, governor's office, and the department of education during the legislative session through implementation of the district's lobbying strategies; dissemination of information concerning district needs, legislative priorities, and concerns; committee testimony; and responses to requests for information.
- Meet with local civic and community groups on an ongoing basis to provide information, discuss issues, and seek support for the school district's legislative priorities.
- Meet with presidents, boards, and the general membership of the PTA and employee groups on an ongoing basis for the same reasons.
- Similarly, meet with statewide education advocacy groups, such as elementary and secondary principals groups and the state school board association, to garner support for district legislative priorities and to develop statewide strategies for achieving the legislative priorities that all groups can support.

On an annual basis:

- Review the legislative priorities.
- Assess the government relations program.

Tools of Communication

Each school district must establish and maintain communication with legislators and the school district's internal and external publics in order to effectively educate the public and advocate, oppose, or defend legislation, laws, or policies. To this end, school district personnel must be able to communicate clearly. They must know the issues and be able to explain the district's position in simple, direct terms.

They must be considerate and polite even in confrontations. And they must be able to state the district's case clearly and concisely.

With these characteristics in mind, following are some specific tools of communication that school leaders will find valuable. Included are guidelines for effective use.

Telephone calls. A telephone call is not as personal as a face-to-face visit with a legislator, but it can be just as effective. Begin by introducing yourself and explaining the reason you are calling. If you are calling about a specific piece of legislation, identify the legislation by bill number.

Do not be surprised if the legislator is not available and an aide handles the call. Legislators count on aides for information about specific issues. They usually are knowledgeable individuals who may exert a great deal of influence over the legislator and, in fact, often advise the legislator as to what stance should be taken on a particular issue or piece of legislation.

Letters, faxes, and postcards. Keep letters short — one to two pages. Identify the issue and the bill number, if appropriate, and state your position clearly. Indicate whether you are representing yourself or a group. Thank the legislator for the time taken to read the letter and ask for a response.

The faxed letter gets to its destination quickly and is particularly useful when there is insufficient time to mail the information. Use a cover sheet to clearly identify yourself and the person to whom the fax is being sent. If the fax is to be distributed to a number of individuals, indicate their names on the cover sheet and ask that the material be duplicated for them.

As in a letter, identify the issue and the bill number, if appropriate, and state your position clearly. Keep the fax short. If you need to send eight or more pages, contact the receiver to determine if a fax is the best way to get information to them. Also, if the material in the fax is

critical or time-sensitive, make a follow-up call to verify that the information was received.

A postcard campaign can be cost-effective and, in some cases, as useful as individual letters. First, when using a postcard campaign with an organization, try to personalize the message. Form a postcard writing group and provide sample statements. Ask the writers to hand write the cards and to ask the recipient of the postcard for a written response.

Mass-produced postcards, while not as effective as hand-written, personalized cards, can have a positive effect if sent in large numbers. The postcards and letters tell the legislature that constituents are interested in an issue and are following it through the legislative process.

Brochures and fact sheets. Both forms can be used to convey information and articulate positions. In designing a brochure, clearly and succinctly identify the issues. Be aware that a too-slick presentation may distract from the message. Indeed, a very polished brochure can send a negative message: If the school district can afford a "fancy brochure," perhaps they don't need the funding after all. Use color judiciously.

Keep fact sheets simple. Use one sheet of paper if possible. Limit the text to one issue. A fact sheet can be used to inform the public, specific interest groups, or the legislators; to advocate a particular course of action; or to defend a district position on an issue.

Letters to the editor. Published letters in local or state journals, newspapers, and magazines can be used to promote a district's legislative priorities. As with all letters, keep the letter to the editor short by stating your case concisely. Most publications limit the length of such letters, often to 150 words, while others will accept special editorials of greater length. Contact the target publications and ask for their guidelines.

Office visits to legislators. Arrange office visits in advance, rather than arriving unannounced. Time initial visits early in the session, when

the legislation is being formed. Schedule other visits around the time when the legislature normally takes up annual issues, such as school funding.

Office visits usually should be short, 10 to 15 minutes, unless scheduled before the session starts and when the legislator may have more time to discuss issues. Be prepared for the visit: Know the issues, state the case in positive terms, and allow time for questions. As with a phone call, the legislator may ask an aide to handle the visit. Talk with the aide as if you were talking with the legislator. The message the aide takes to the legislator concerning the visit may be based as much on your attitude as on the issue itself.

At the end of the session, legislators often are hurried, trying to conduct a great deal of unfinished business before the end of the session. During this period, they often do not have time to visit with constituents. Therefore, this rush period is a good time to rely on lobbyists or representatives from state organizations, such as school board and administrative associations.

Testimony before the legislature. Prior to going before the committee, learn the names of the members of the committee and their positions. Seek out a member of the committee who may be favorable to your position and ask for guidance about how to present the case before the entire committee. A committee member who supports your position may be able to suggest information that should be included in your testimony.

Before the committee, introduce yourself and whether you are representing yourself, your district, or a coalition of people or organizations. Identify the issue and whether you are for or against it. If it is a specific piece of legislation, identify the bill by its number and date. (Be sure that you are addressing the right issue. It is amazing how many people come to testify before the legislature or a committee on an issue only to discover that they are working with a different version of the bill than is currently before the committee.)

29

Provide reasons why the legislation should be supported or not. Answer possible objections to your position if it helps solidify your case. Be prepared to respond to questions by legislators if there is time. Don't worry if you are not polished and smooth. Sincere testimony by a nervous presenter often is more acceptable to the committee than a slick presentation that might cause them to focus more on how the information was presented than on the content. Limit yourself to the time specified by the committee. Thank the committee when you finish testifying and offer to be available for further assistance with the issue if necessary.

It also is important to have a written copy of your testimony available so that it may be shared with committee members who are unable to attend the hearing.

Another suggestion for testifying before the legislature is to arrange for other supporters to speak about the bill. Ask them not only to support your position but also to add new information from their personal experience or their organization's perspective.

Finally, choose your battles wisely. Not all issues are of equal importance. Testify in those instances when your interests are most vital and before those committees where such testimony is likely to be most effective.

Student advocates. Students often are excellent advocates. They often can speak with simplicity and clarity. However, school leaders must be sensitive to their position and to the ethical considerations of asking students to advocate district positions. Be able to answer the question as to what purpose they serve: Are students being used just for emotional effect or do they have something to contribute to the discussion that should not be omitted?

Photographs. Photographs serve several purposes. First, they can be used to make a point in support of an issue. A single photograph of students using a closet in an elementary school as a classroom makes the point of overcrowding in a building in a dramatic fashion. Docu-

menting dilapidated facilities with photographs also serves to make the same point.

Photographs also can be used as a reason to initiate contact with the legislator. A photograph of a legislator outside a facility for which he or she helped obtain funding might find itself prominently displayed in his or her office. Photographs can serve as mementos of meetings, as a way of saying thank you for coming, or as a way of reminding the legislator of the event.

Special events. Open houses, luncheons, and ribbon cutting ceremonies all provide opportunities for school personnel to mingle with legislators and for the legislators to learn more about the school district, its programs, and its facilities. Such events also may be a way to say thank you to them for their support on a particular project or issue.

Organization is the key to a successful event. Plan the event well in advance to allow for adjustments in calendars and potential scheduling conflicts. Be sensitive to the purpose of the event, who is being invited, when the event is being held, cost considerations, and any potential negative reactions to the event. Be sure to invite the media to cover the event.

Handbooks for legislators and legislative directories. A simple district handbook or notebook provided to legislators before the start of the session should give them important information, such as:

- School Board members' names and phone numbers;
- Superintendent, central administration, school, department, and program contact names and phone numbers;
- School day schedules; and
- Physical locations of schools and legislative boundaries.

A legislative directory should be similar to the handbook, except it is prepared for internal use by school board members, administrators, and other key staff members. An effective directory should contain:

- Names of legislators and their staff members, their phone numbers, and the schools that fall within their legislative districts;
- Board-approved legislative priorities;
- The legislative action plan;
- Names of key governmental agencies, their staffs, and phone numbers;
- State board of education members; and
- Local officials, key committee members, and their phone numbers.

Placing the legislative directory in a ring binder will provide a means for keeping lobbyist's reports, legislative updates, and correspondence.

Posters and updates. During the legislative session, school personnel can place posters in district buildings to let staff and visitors know how to contact their legislators about key issues. And the posters can be useful in giving basic information about issues, particularly for visitors and students. Keep the posters bold and simple.

Legislative updates perform a comparable service. Prepare short, one- to two-page briefings of activities in the legislature and distribute the updates to staff and, when appropriate, to students and parents. Updates, like posters, help to keep everyone apprised of the legislature's work.

School leaders also may want to subscribe to special publications or services that provide legislative updates. State education associations or independent agencies often produce such updates, which can be adapted for local reproduction.

Proclamations and resolutions. Legislators use proclamations and resolutions to honor individuals or organizations and to show formal support for an issue. School districts should consider doing the same.

For example, in Alaska, the Alaska Association of Elementary School Principals and the Alaska Association of Secondary School Principals passed a formal resolution in support of the legislature and declared

the first week in December as "Honor Your Legislature Week," during which principals from across the state were asked to contact their legislators and invite them into their schools to share their programs and their needs. The resolution provided a formal statewide starting point for legislators to be in contact with the schools.

Advertising. Placing a paid advertisement calling for support of or opposition to legislative issues on the local or national level is becoming an effective and commonplace practice. However, school boards usually are prohibited from advertising in this manner. Employee groups, child-advocate organizations, or independent community groups established to support or oppose a specific issue may purchase advertising in the various media.

The information superhighway. The electronic highway already is affecting the legislative process. In some states, such as Alaska, anyone with access to a university, public library, or home computer modem can tap into the legislative information database and obtain daily updates of committee meetings and teleconferences, the previous day's legislative activity, and the current status of legislation. Other information available through computer access includes:

- U.S. census data
- U.S. government budget
- Election results
- White House press releases and news
- Congressional committee assignments
- *Federal Register*
- *Congressional Quarterly*

Teleconferencing via phone or video is becoming a more accepted means of interacting with legislators. Future telecommunications will make it even easier for interested constituents to follow the proceedings of the legislature.

Access to the Internet and other emerging databases will become more prevalent in the future, and obtaining access will become easier, which will result in more information being available to school districts and the general public. Already, a wide variety of electronic bulletin boards on various topics of interest can be found.

However, a word of caution is necessary. On one hand, access to information will make it easier for interested members of the public to follow legislation; on the other hand, it also will enable special interest groups to get their message to their constituencies more rapidly, thus enabling them to participate more fully in the shaping of public policy as well.

Effective Government Relations at the Federal Level

Establishing an effective government relations program at the federal level may seem beyond the capability of all but the largest of school districts. However, any school district can contact its federal representatives on any issue by picking up the telephone or writing a letter.

Equally important is maintaining coalitions or affiliations with national organizations that support the public education agenda. For example, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) maintains a Legislative Corps, a network of concerned administrators from around the United States on which it can call for assistance. The American Association of School Boards (AASB) and the National Education Association (NEA) offer similar collaborations. Each of these associations puts out "action needed" notices to its members when a critical issue is before a congressional committee or up for a vote in the House or Senate. And each of these agencies has an advocacy presence in Washington, D.C.

School leaders also should consider subscribing to national education publications, such as *Education Week*, or to nationally prominent professional journals, such as *Phi Delta Kappan*. Phi Delta Kappa also produces a *Washington Newsletter*, which it sends on a regular basis to its members.

Contacting such federal agencies as the Department of Education directly whenever there is a concern also should be actively pursued

as part of the government relations program. The names of legislators and agencies of the federal government can be obtained through the local library.

36

Ethical Issues in Government Relations

Honesty and integrity are the starting points in building effective government relations. However, they are not enough. No matter how honest we are, no matter how pure our motives or how solid our principles, there are rules to be followed — particularly regarding lobbying.

Almost every state, territory, and province has an ethics agency or commission that establishes principles of ethics governing lobbying of the legislature. In most instances, the agencies regulate the lobbying activities that can or cannot be done and by whom. They establish guidelines that may require an individual to register as a lobbyist and to report activities, income, and expenditures.

Before undertaking a lobbying effort, school leaders must learn the applicable rules of their state. For school administrators or other public officials or employees lobbying on behalf of their agency or institution, perhaps nothing needs to done. For individuals hired on behalf of a school district, it may mean completing detailed reports.

Similarly, supporting political candidates is a matter that requires careful understanding of applicable laws. School districts, in general, cannot directly support political candidates. However, individual educators and like-minded groups of people can provide support that mirrors a school district's legislative priorities.

Members of the school board, administrators, and other employees of the school district must distinguish between personal feelings and

the official position of the school district when talking with legislators. An individual school leader may find that remaining neutral on political candidates may be difficult; but if your responsibility is to represent the district before the legislature or before a local government entity, then neutrality is required.

Phi Delta Kappa Fastbacks

Two annual series, published each spring and fall, offer fastbacks on a wide range of educational topics. Each fastback is intended to be a focused, authoritative treatment of a topic of current interest to educators and other readers. Several hundred fastbacks have been published since the program began in 1972, many of which are still in print. Among the topics are:

Administration
Adult Education
The Arts
At-Risk Students
Careers
Censorship
Community Involvement
Computers
Curriculum
Decision Making
Dropout Prevention
Foreign Study
Gifted and Talented
Legal Issues
Mainstreaming
Multiculturalism
Nutrition
Parent Involvement
School Choice
School Safety
Special Education
Staff Development
Teacher Training
Teaching Methods
Urban Education
Values
Vocational Education
Writing

For a current listing of available fastbacks and other publications of the Educational Foundation, please contact Phi Delta Kappa, 408 N. Union, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402-0789, or (812) 339-1156.

Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation

The Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation was established on 13 October 1966 with the signing, by Dr. George H. Reavis, of the irrevocable trust agreement creating the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation Trust.

George H. Reavis (1883-1970) entered the education profession after graduating from Warrensburg Missouri State Teachers College in 1906 and the University of Missouri in 1911. He went on to earn an M.A. and a Ph.D. at Columbia University. Dr. Reavis served as assistant superintendent of schools in Maryland and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. In 1929 he was appointed director of instruction for the Ohio State Department of Education. But it was as assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in the Cincinnati public schools (1939-48) that he rose to national prominence.

Dr. Reavis' dream for the Educational Foundation was to make it possible for seasoned educators to write and publish the wisdom they had acquired over a lifetime of professional activity. He wanted educators and the general public to "better understand (1) the nature of the educative process and (2) the relation of education to human welfare."

The Phi Delta Kappa fastbacks were begun in 1972. These publications, along with monographs and books on a wide range of topics related to education, are the realization of that dream.